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ABSTRACT

This booklet is a condensation of a presentation by an official of the State Department of Public Instruction to a group of teachers attending a workshop on human relations. The discussion centers on the natural barriers such as age, race, and socioeconomic status that hinder successful student-teacher interaction and may contribute to student behavior problems. The influence of family background and peer group influence is stressed, and recommendations are made on how to deal effectively and fairly with any disciplinary problems that may arise. (JG)

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AN APPROACH TO DISCIPLINE IN THE DESEGREGATED SCHOOL

1972

Division of Human Relations
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

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FOREWORD

Educators know that a learning atmosphere can be greatly enhanced by order in a school. To assure that order will prevail, there must be an effective system or means to control behavior. Discipline is defined as "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral faculties." This implies that mere control of pupils is not discipline in the finest state, but that discipline must aim toward the perfection of lasting values and permanent qualities which will be the frame of reference for all future behavior.

This paper is not a product of research. Nor is it necessarily a synthesis of tried and successful methods. It is, rather, a condensation of an excellent presentation by Dudley Flood, Director of the Division of Human Relations of the State Department of Public Instruction, to a group of teachers attending a workshop on human relations. It is hoped that it may have some value to other educators as we all search for answers to problems of mutual concern.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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Some Factors That Influence Pupil Behavior

If one is to effectively channel the behavior of pupils, he must have some knowledge of the factors which influence the behavioral trends of today's youth. By careful observation and concerted effort in that direction, any teacher can learn enough of these factors to equip himself to do a better job with his pupils. Some basic knowledge of human sociology is helpful in interpreting the things which we observe.

Teachers should be aware of the existence in our social structure of certain factors which comprise natural barriers to not only the learning process but to human interaction as well. We are socially grouped into many different divisions according to such factors as geographical residence, political philosophy, economic possessions, age, and race. In making the designation of these divisions, there is the factor that status is concomitantly assigned to the divisions. For example, north is higher than south, urban is higher than rural, rich is higher than poor, white is higher than black, and old is higher than young in terms of status. The fact that such divisions and status positions exist make it likely that the most natural position for members of opposite groups to take would be adversary positions.

The barrier of age has been often referred to as the "generation gap." To many, this term signals a sense of futility in any effort which might be made to span or lessen the gap. The solution to bridging the gap may be found in understanding some of the causes of its existence.

The barrier of age is the most restrictive

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barrier in the minds of youth. They view the status of adults with envy and resentment. Their natural reaction is to "put down" the adult image; that is, to label the image so negatively as to assure ample defense against its glamor. The paradox here is that while rejecting the adult image overtly, the same youth may be striving incessantly to imitate that image.

Self-concept is the picture one develops of himself and is frequently consistant with the status assignment imposed by the barriers mentioned earlier. His image of others is also consistent with their assigned status. Thus the basis for the relationship between persons emerges from the perspective in which they view themselves in relation to others in keeping with status positions. For example, suppose that the teacher is white, middle-class, urban and old and the student is black, low-class, rural and young. There are present in this relationship four natural barriers which must be realized and overcome before learning can receive priority. The more opposite characteristics one adds to this list, the more deterents to the learning process are in evidence. Compatability can ensue only if the teacher becomes aware of the presence of these barriers and works actively toward the elimination of them.

Learned Values Result From Experiences

Experience is the basis for our values. For many children, the school provides their only opportunity to learn a system of positive values. The environment in which economically deprived children live may foster a set of values in a completely different perspective from that of the child who is the product of an affluent community. A case in point is the formation of attitudes toward work.

To the child of middle-class parents, "work"

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may denote a condition of arising in the morning, having a warm shower, hot breakfast, dressing neatly, and heading for the office, plant or school to return early in the evening, enjoy a leisurely meal and relax or recreate. To the child of low economic class parents, work may denote awaking before sunrise, being away from home far into the evening, coming home too tired to be attentive to either family needs or living conditions and deriving no self-gratification and little financial reward from one's efforts. It is easy to see why one of these conditions inspires initiative while the other begets disdain for "work."

When a child is reared in an atmosphere of economic instability and his needs of subsistence must frequently go unsatisfied, his goals are likely to be short ranged and materialistic. A child has difficulty focusing his attention on such objectives as career goals and worthy adult citizenship when faced with the question of whether or not he will have food for today's dinner or shoes to wear to school tomorrow.

The pupil who is loud and boisterous may be the product of an environment wherein loudness is essential for effective communication. The child who lives next to the railroad tracks, an interstate highway or an industrial plant learns to compete with noise. He also learns to "tune out" unwanted sounds, which may include the lecture of a classroom teacher or the pleadings of a parent.

Another value which many pupils lack is that of meeting strict requirements of time. Here again the economic factor may be one of the influences. When people have nothing of importance to do day after day, time has little importance to them. The carry-over of this attitude from adults to children is evident among the economically deprived to the extent that they are often late for school and are

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frequently absent for trivial reasons.

Promptness may be encouraged by assigning responsibility to this pupil. He usually will respond to purpose, but may not have a complete transformation overnight. Time and reinforcement are both necessary to complete the process.

These are but a few examples and illustrations of the pattern by which experiences shape values and ultimately determine behavior. The alert teacher will discover and remedy many other manifestations of this phenomenon.

Peer Group Approval

Probably the most dynamic force in influencing student behavior is the peer group approval factor. Modes of dress, language usage, fads, slogans and many other trends are standardized on this factor.

Since the youth's self-image is that of having been assigned subservient status, inner-group identity tends to develop. Common habits and customs become important to maintain acceptable membership in the group. Many young people are hereby made social captives, indulging in acts they neither enjoy nor condone.

To deal effectively with discipline problems which are motivated by the desire for approval of peer groups, the adult must recognize that forcefulness on his part may be the perpetrator's desired response in that it further tends to polarize the positions of the two age groups and may make a "martyr" of the offender.

Many overt acts of pupil behavior are symptomatic of deeply rooted attitudes based on family and peer group experiences. This is especially true with respect to reactions to racial labels and sym-

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bols. The disruptions to school programs which grow out of racial reactions usually defy any rationale. Classroom confrontations between pupils of different races place the educators in a precarious position. They must decide whether it is feasible to remove the participants in disruptions from the school setting at the price of depriving them of further educational opportunities or to attempt the longer and more delicate task of influencing a change of attitudes. Many educators would feel that attitudes are basically developed and reinforced by the home and that it is a waste of time to try to change them. Experience shows, however, that students are prone to strive for the acceptance of their school community, including teachers. It may be worth the time and effort to give it a try.

As the teacher has experiences with the pupil in the school community setting, many opportunities will present themselves wherein she may better know her pupils. Having learned all she can about them, she is better able to channel the progress of each child more in keeping with his basic inclinations.

Some Specific Application of Disciplinary Action

Matters of routine discipline should be expected to occur in any school and should be handled by the teacher nearest to the problem at the time of its occurrence. Infractions of a serious nature should be referred to the principal. In either case, prevention is more beneficial to all concerned than is punishment after the act.

Define Areas of Unacceptable Behavior

Since the terms "right" and "wrong" are relative terms, they serve little purpose as a basis for establishing guidelines for student behavior. Pupils can defend in their own minds most any act that we might label as wrong or bad by pointing to

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some respectable person who is the personification of the act in question. Furthermore there may be conflicting opinions between the home and school as to what is good or bad. A workable alternative to this is that of catagorizing areas of acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

The end objective remains the same; that the pattern of behavior hopefully will be modified. However, the stimulus is a much more positive one and desirable results are more likely to occur. To look at a specific point, a child whose parents are frequent imbibers of alcoholic beverages cannot condemn the act of drinking as being bad without also condemning his own parents. However, the term "acceptable" restricts judgment to those immediate areas over which the school has jurisdiction. This includes the student's behavior and excludes that of the parent. The child can then see that the school is concerned about his habits and not necessarily being critical of persons outside the school community.

This same principle holds true with regard to a wide range of acts including smoking, the use of profanity, cheating, lying and stealing, fighting, untidiness, rudeness and many others. The principle of the unacceptability of these must be sold to the student body to the extent that they begin to remind each other to avoid the performing of such acts.

Avoid Embarrassing Students

The teacher must be constantly aware of the fact that young people are very sensitive to their status in society. They are beginning, at junior high school age, to become deeply concerned with the image which their peers may have of them and the desire for peer group approval becomes a dominant factor in influencing pupil behavior.

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The teacher should be especially careful to avoid personal references to pupils in this age group. The pupil should be made to see the act as separate and apart from himself. The act is rejected, not the child. The child discerns that he must discontinue this act so that he can maintain his acceptability. This becomes a positive incentive to do that which is more nearly the norm of behavior in this setting.

This approach is more effective if it can be done with the individual in privacy. If several students are guilty of the same violation, there is a great temptation to deal with them as a group and there are occasions which may necessitate group counsel. However, individual conferences usually impress pupils more in that a feeling of personal worth is gained from having had the personal attention of someone in authority.

Avoid "Baiting" Students

The teacher should be constantly aware of the effect he may have on pupils in the mannerisms which he exhibits. One's personal idiocyncroses may become a deterent to the learning process if personal issues are injected into the school setting.

A student should never be placed in the position of feeling that he has nothing further to lose. A typical example of this is the situation in which the teacher assigns grades to a pupil which are so low that they cannot possibly be off-set within the scope of the term. The reward of being promoted ceases to be an incentive factor and the pupil may lose his dedication to the course. Moreover, he may transfer his energy from constructive to disruptive practices.

It is advisable that as far as possible, the

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grading process should be used to reflect only the measurable aspect of academic achievement. If grades are used to inforce discipline, some of the validity of their significance is lost.

Avoid Debating With Students

The teacher, having made a decision, should not degrade herself by engaging in a debate with a pupil regarding the merits of the decision. It is healthy to hear the opinions of the student on matters effecting his welfare, but nothing is to be gained from arguing a point. If the stand which the teacher has taken is a good and fair one, it will not need to be defended to the student. If it is a poor or unfair decision, the teacher will do well to take the initiative to change it as soon as she recognizes its shortcomings.

Avoid Threats to Pupils

The wise teacher will always leave room for discussion on issues. Even after an issue is finalized, there should be some graceful recourse by which there may be modification of the final decision, if the ends of justice and harmony can better be served by so doing.

Teachers should not anticipate the disposition the principal will make of a disciplinary issue. Before having allowed him to react to information surrounding an issue, teachers sometimes predict to pupils that the "principal should expel you" or some like form of punishment. Should the principal reach some other decision after having weighed the issues, he has probably alienated the teacher. The teacher's role should be to present the issues to the principal and permit him to make the decision on the basis of the information presented and whatever factors he feels he must take into consideration. Teachers should remember that

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the principle of justice which holds that the accused must be deemed innocent until his guilt is established holds true in the school.

Avoid Conflicting Policy

The code of behavior for a school should be administered uniformly throughout the school. Acts prohibited in one classroom and tolerated in another cause a general breakdown in discipline. For instance, if teacher A allows gum chewing in class and teacher B prohibits it, one wonders if the rules were not arbitrarily made by teacher B.

Areas in which final authority rests with the teacher should be defined in the school policy guide. Matters not covered in these areas which involve serious offenses should be called to the principal's attention. Since the principal is the official public relations officer of the school, he needs to be apprised of matters of serious implications so that he can relate them in proper prospective to all individuals concerned.

Students expect to have some authority exerted over their behavior. A teacher or principal who fails to recognize this fact may not win the respect of his pupils. Teachers should use their own authority in as many situations as possible. The best place for solving problems of discipline is at the classroom level. When a pupil has to be taken to the principal, this represents a different level of disciplinary action with more social implications. If his case goes all the way to the superintendent, this involves yet another set of social implications; and if it must be acted on by the board of education, it may have reached dramatic proportions. Obviously, the hope is that most issues which arise in the school will be solved by teachers working directly with their students.

Finally, should a teacher find himself to be in error in his dealing with pupils, he should not be reluctant to admit his mistake. He will suffer no loss of prestige from such an admission. However, the best time to right an injustice is just as soon as the error is discovered. If one delays, justification for the error tends to build until it becomes very unlikely that he will see it in its truest prospective.

Summary and Conclusions

It seems needless to say that none of the measures discussed here can guarantee that good behavior will result from their application. There is, however, strong evidence to support the position that, if reasonable attention is given to the development of attitudes toward a set of common goals and effort given to "selling" these goals, it is likely that youngsters will identify with these goals and move toward them. Only after these goals have been established can pupils begin to chart a course as to how to reach them.